Connected Communities

Remaking society

Tom Wakeford, Graham Jeffery and Kerrie Schaefer

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Executive Summary

In this pilot demonstrator project, four community arts and media organisations committed to engagement with autonomous and dynamic communities drew on the creativity of local people. Together they either addressed issues, solved problems or generated alternatives – sometimes all three.

We joined these groups' exploration - through performance, visual art and digital media - of the extent to which people conventionally regarded as excluded from society can choose to negotiate their own inclusion through activities of cultural production. We considered how the activities of artists and academics can avoid being shaped or distorted by the very governmental and market logics that they seek to critique. The live artworks, performances, and radio programmes created by the four groups were studied as ways of engaging people in conversations about the places in which they live and the futures of their communities.

Working with Bradford Community Broadcasting, Swingbridge Media, Love Milton and Theatre Modo, the pilot explored the value of arts practices in making and re-making dynamic communities. We have combined participant observation of cultural bricoleurs and artistic tricksters with structured interviews and surveys, as well as direct engagement through practice-based work in the generation of cultural and media products. The result supplements conventional 'objective' truths with potential paths to imagined futures.

Ground rules for future work in this field:

1. Effective innovation requires the kind of engagement that is committed to change – what we call *engagé*.
2. Establishing mutual respect for the moral and intellectual standing of all collaborators is essential.
3. Spontaneous learning through practical activities of making, remaking and inventing with the resources available – bricolage – is a fertile route to create emancipatory spaces where people can work together.
4. Beware the evidence trap. Outside assistance and resources from government agencies and other organisations are needed to address deprivation, but the agenda should be set by the people most directly affected. All interpretations of resulting research or action should be assessed from a variety of perspectives, not just those of outsiders.

Researchers and Project Partners

Graham Jeffery, Neill Patton, Kerrie Schaefer and Tom Wakeford with Bradford Community Broadcasting, Love Milton, Swingbridge Media and Theatre Modo.

Key words

bricolage, community arts, participatory democracy, performance, visual art, digital media

Tom Wakeford, University of Edinburgh

Graham Jeffery, University of the West of Scotland

Kerrie Schaefer, University of Exeter

Remaking Society

Background

Remaking Society started from the premise that, at a time when so many people across the UK lack some of their basic requirements for wellbeing, socially engaged arts practice can make a significant contribution to wellbeing. Artistic activity can help to create a sense of community, articulate alternative visions of the future and help us to re-imagine a better life. Dynamic new communities are built through the strength of creative engagement among people with diverse experiences and skills.

Creative and other ventures for social benefit in the UK now struggle in an environment in which public, and much private, funding has evaporated. This follows a period in which grassroots artists were comparatively well funded, but may have stopped acting as a critical voice. Behind this project lies the vexed question of how the activities of artists and the academics who collaborate with them can avoid being influenced and altered by the very governmental and market logics that they seek to critique through their work.

The practically-oriented field of community arts suffers from short-term project funding, a lack of both historical documentation and political contextualisation. Community artists working in the 1970s made a strategic decision to hold back from explicitly articulating critiques of the social order, often in order to avoid potential loss of government funding. By the 1980s the movement had been reduced to "something with the status of ameliorative social work for what are pejoratively called disadvantaged groups" (Kelly 1984).

The use of the arts as an instrument to fulfil government policy objectives grew under a recent funding boom of the 2000's. Many initiatives embodied a deficit model of social development under which groups experiencing deprivation were identified by outside researchers as needing assistance, rather than being given space to define or research themselves. Social regeneration programmes, including arts interventions, were typically designed and delivered by experts, often with little or no connection to local people., and with a focus on developing an efficient and compliant workforce.

The deficit model positions people as passive recipients of welfare, who are dependent on service providers to address their deficiencies

and their needs. The model still persists in most deprived areas of the UK, with populations typically seen from the perspective of their largest deficit, such as "the area with the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Britain" or the "area with the highest proportion of people on disability benefit" (GCPH 2011).

Jon Hawkes, a consultant to our project, has become internationally known for showing that models based on what he calls the three classic "pillars" of development (social, environmental and economic), are an insufficient basis for a healthy society (Hawkes, 2001). Rather than a public cultural policy that emphasises its economic impact, Hawkes argues that developing "cultural vitality" should be an integral part of democratic public planning, in which culture is understood as a system of social meaning, values and aspirations.

Hawkes' framework informed the Art and Wellbeing strategy of the CCD board of the Australia Council for the Arts and The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (Vic Health), a public health body well known for supporting cultural activities to address the "social determinants" of health. Vic Health went on to commission a key study into the relationship between cultural activity and community wellbeing (Mulligan et. al., 2006) from which this pilot takes its definition of wellbeing as "related to our sense of social connectedness, inclusion and participation, existential security and safety, political citizenship, self-development and actualisation, and opportunities for education, recreation and creative expression" (p22).

The context within which this project took place is also one where artists have become polarised between a well-networked, well-resourced elite and the relatively disorganised and disconnected groups working at the grassroots. Arts professionals, social scientists and policy-makers often view socially engaged art as being low-quality, inferior, local or parochial forms of culture. The democratic language of "community art", rooted in the everyday, stands in contrast to the sometimes arcane terminology employed by contemporary arts academics (Perry 2013).

Socially engaged arts practices have become more prominent in the years since the banking collapse of 2008, and in particular since the drastic public spending cuts that began in 2010. But the groups with which we worked have been active in the field for a decade or more and have a long-term commitment and capacity to working within the context of the local, the neighbourhood. Each of our sites was selected

because of a long-term commitment to building relationships through arts and media practices within the communities in which the organisations are situated.

Remaking community

The term "community" is used in many different, and indeed problematic, ways in social, political and cultural discourse. In this project we decided, as a matter of principle, to build on dynamic, democratic and emancipatory concepts of community, rooted in the critical history of the community arts movement. In government and academic discourse, the term usually refers to people with comparatively low socio-economic or cultural status. Dynamic notions of community, by contrast, allow the creation of communities of interest that are united by a common purpose. This process of self-definition allows them/us to resist being subsumed within the priorities of outside agencies and to retain their/our oppositional integrity.

The autonomy of such communities introduces the possibility of internal negotiation as a basic mode of creative interaction. Their commitment to the values of democracy as a principle leads to the possibility of broad alliances between autonomous groups through an insistence on common access to the process of creating meaning and value within the culture (Watt 1991 p64).

Remaking Society was a partnership of four arts and media organisations who embodied this idea of autonomous and dynamic community in Bradford, Fraserburgh, Glasgow and Tyneside. We recognised people in economically deprived areas as resourceful and often gifted (Goldbard 2006). The artists drew upon and harnessed the capacities and creativities of these people in an attempt to address issues and solve problems.

Using performance and digital media, we worked with our four partner organisations to explore the extent to which people conventionally regarded as excluded can negotiate either their own inclusion in - or their continued exclusion from – society through involvement in practical activities of cultural production: in the case of Bradford Community Broadcasting, programme-making, for Tyneside's Swingbridge Media, film-making, for Glasgow's Love Milton, building, designing and responding to a public art project; for Fraserburgh's Theatre Modo, participation in a large-scale carnival parade, with attendant skills development (See illustrations below).

A key task of *Remaking Society* has been to explore the value of arts practices in these "dynamic" communities. This "value" cannot be reduced to "social impact" or purely economic value since the practices themselves resist being subsumed by governmental and market logics and point to the persistence of other, perhaps intangible, non-market values – of communication, of solidarity, of being together.

We began our pilot with a workshop that allowed a collaborative exploration of all our past practices. All four groups nominated the community-engaged arts initiatives they were undertaking during 2012-13 that were relevant to the theme of the pilot. This report summarises our provisional analysis of these initiatives.

Community arts practices as re-makers of society

We observed three features of community-engaged arts practices that were central to their use in remaking society.

i) Engagé

The main driving forces for all four organisations with whom we are in partnership are the values and attitudes of the individuals who make them up. What distinguishes these practitioners and scholar-activists is their active and committed relationship to the people most affected by their subject matter. Following Cohen Cruz (2010, p.5), we distinguish this from applied performance, which may carry the implication that a professional who has the answers to a problem simply bestows them on passive populations.

We echo Jean-Paul Sartre's call (using the French word engagé) for artists to be committed to act in support of universal human rights and justice. Ellingson (2011) extends this to the realm of research, when she reminds us that "research is always political, potentially revolutionary, and never neutral: Researchers must choose between research that is 'engaged' or 'complicit': By engaged, I mean clear-eyed, self-critical awareness that research does not proceed in epistemological purity or moral innocence".

We suggest that this is the first of three core values and attitudes that underpin the work of the four community arts organisations. Being engagé in this way transcends the specific definitions of the different art forms.

The second core value is the commitment to the moral standing of those with whom we were entering into creative activity. A person is considered to have moral standing if we believe that it makes a difference, morally, how that individual is treated, quite apart from the effect it has on others (Velasquez and Andre 1991). In short: the benefit to a wider population cannot justify any mistreatment of an individual. This value is similar to those outlined by those applying virtue ethics to action research (Brydon-Miller 2008).

The third core value is one of working on an equal footing. Whatever the differences in professional background or life experience of the diverse individuals working together, each should value the insights and skills of the other.

By basing their projects – both long-term collaborations and shorter-term celebrations - on these three core values, the organisations with which we have worked have developed what we call "deep practice" – a depth of creative collaboration (or co-production) based on trust and mutual understanding.

ii) Bricoleurs and tricksters

Each of the four organisations are outside the mainstream. Their very existence represents a challenge to the creative landscape, particularly in their geographical location. Love Milton exists in parallel and sometimes in conflict with, the local authority and other agencies that are meant to represent the best interests of the people of Milton. One of only a handful of independent community radio stations in the country, Bradford Community Broadcasting is a bottom-up alternative to the local BBC and commercial radio. Swingbridge Media has been making films that challenge the way in which people's knowledge and creativity is represented since the 1970s. Finally, Theatre Modo, provides an alternative route to creativity for young people who are stigmatised by and often excluded from, their own communities.

The creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available, a process known as bricolage, characterised the work of, the four partner organisations. Through our joint planning, research and analysis we became joint interpretative bricoleurs, employing different methodological processes as they were needed in a dynamic community context, reflecting our collective commitment to an emancipatory approach (Denzin and Lincoln 2011 p.6). Together with our partner organisations, we took part in community carnivals, co-produced film screenings and co-wrote conference papers. We

privileged no methodological approach over another – using contemporaneous notes, interviews, participant-observation and the joint making of new art and media works – in film, audio, performance and public visual arts.

In their different ways, each organisation acts as a cultural agitator from the margins. In doing so they often take the role of the jester or "trickster". The trickster is the ubiquitous, mischievous, character in ancient indigenous folk tales and in myths from many cultures. A marginal figure, the trickster is travelling, passing through, amongst and between, "[keeping] the world lively and [giving] it the flexibility to endure" (Hyde, 1998: 9). Trickster myths are a celebration and a reminder of the need to open up spaces for dialogue and reflection within one's own culture. They also create carnivalesque inversions of market norms into gift economies: young people operating giant puppets in a fire-lit parade (Theatre Modo), or a grandparent and grand-daughter making up stories together stimulated by a small ceramic animal borrowed from an improvised library of creatures (Love Milton: Odd Numbers) are forms of communal cultural practice that resist commodification or monetisation and point to other values, beyond the economic.

iii) Subversive truths

Both our approach to generating better understanding of community arts practices, and the extent to which the practices themselves constitute research, eschew the claim to objectivity of conventional social science. The understandings reached by ourselves and the four initiatives with which we collaborated in this pilot have been brought about by approaches that exist on what Ellingson (2011 p.596) calls a qualitative continuum. At one end is what Haraway (1988) famously calls the "view from nowhere" – positivist knowledge that appears to be objectively true, generalisable and aims to predict and control behaviour. At the other end are personal and specific perspectives generated through storytelling, sociological introspection, performance and art-making. Our pilot demonstrator project uses what Ellingson calls "middle-ground approaches" of situated knowledge that exists in between the two extremes.

The engaged arts practices we have explored in this pilot can only be understood in the context of place, where people from diverse backgrounds carry multiple perspectives. We have combined participant observation of bricoleurs and tricksters with structured

interviews and surveys as well as direct engagement through practice-based work in the generation of cultural and media products.

What we have witnesses is the highest standards of community arts, which carries a broader range of criteria than those applied to mainstream arts. We echo Eugene van Erven, who argues that "true art is the ability to repeatedly come up with new approaches that are most appropriate to a specific artist and a specific situation, and people who recognise that it is impossible to distil a single simple truth that can be reduced to a set of figures." Like Rustom Bharucha, we believe that good community arts display "a different kind of excellence [and] a different kind of chemistry" to that of mainstream art – a "subversive truth" in the intensity, immediacy and clarity of expression (Bharucha quoted in van Erven 2013).

In bringing some of the subversive truths present in four communities to light, we hope to have made some steps towards reviving and diversifying the community of critical analysis that is so badly needed in the UK at present.

Futures

We began by asking how the activities of artists and the academics can avoid being co-opted by the governmental and market logics that they seek to critique. Our conclusion, based on our work with these four organisations, is that there is no simple answer to this question. However, our project highlights three important ground rules for future work in this area:

1. Being engagé. A commitment to change and a respect for the moral and intellectual standing of all collaborators is essential.
2. Using bricolage to find emancipatory spaces where people who seek to be engagé can work together, not only through discursive, linguistic frames but through practical activities of making, remaking and inventing.
3. Avoiding the evidence trap by exposing subversive truths. If outside funding can be accessed to address deprivation, then the people most directly affected by the interventions need to set the agenda, and outcomes judged in holistic ways. Insights from community arts are an essential starting point, rather than a narrow focus on scientific evidence that will inevitably fail define appropriate criteria for the appropriate needs to be assessed.

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